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# Creating a Customer-Centric Culture "Walking a Mile in the Customer's Shoes" at Texas Instruments

*Dan Parisi and Jeff McCreary*

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## Summary

Texas Instruments (TI) used an innovative business simulation experience, co-created with BTS USA, to transform TI's overly product-centric culture into a more customer-centric culture. TI's senior vice president of worldwide sales and marketing, Jeff McCreary, harnessed the power of experiential learning to convert TI from an entrenched culture of technical arrogance to compelling passion for the customer. This article gives two perspectives: the perspective of the TI senior executive, Jeff McCreary, who led the change process, and the perspective of the lead consultant, Dan Parisi, from BTS USA, who collaborated with TI to create the simulation experience known as the "The Customer Loyalty Boot Camp." The article contains detail on the learning objectives and simulation methodology that was used to engage and teach over two thousand TI executives and managers. The article concludes with comments from Jeff McCreary regarding the significant impact of the training experience on TI culture and business results.

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## Introduction (The TI/Jeff McCreary Perspective)

Imagine you are a senior sales executive at the world's third-largest semiconductor company. Your company creates and markets arguably the most complex products on the planet—products that require a mind-boggling orchestration of the latest advances in sub-micron physics, electronics, chemistry, and engineering. Your workforce is comprised of world-class engineers, physicists, mathematicians, and scientists, who create highly differentiated products.

Your company is also experiencing unprecedented revenue, margin, and stock price growth. Innovative products, growing margins, bigger employee bonuses—what could be wrong with this picture? It turns out that a lot can be wrong, especially when formerly loyal customers begin calling to tell you they are switching from your company to your nearest competitor's.

By any benchmark, you know your product is great. Your technology is superior to the competition. Why would customers leave?

On closer inspection of your financial data, you realize that market share trends support the anecdotal information you are hearing from defecting customers. While your revenues are increasing in your high-growth markets, market share is slipping against your direct competition.

More of your best customers are consciously and systematically embracing your competitor's solutions. Why is this happening?

You begin to drill beneath the surface. You dialogue with defecting customers. You begin to hear things about your corporate culture you do not want to hear. Customers tell you the following:

- Your culture has become overly product centric.
- Your people are too inwardly focused.
- Your workforce radiates a sense of technical arrogance.
- Your product has truly become king, and your customer service has slipped.

Sure, many of these characteristics are representative of your entire industry. However, it has become clear that you are among the worst of the offenders. You realize you can't fix this market share problem with a better product. This won't be cured by a better business model either. This is a culture problem. Do you take on the monumental task of trying to change a deeply embedded corporate culture?

This is the exact situation I found myself in as the senior vice president of worldwide sales and marketing at Texas Instruments at the close of 2000. The rest of this article is about how we used a dynamic business simulation training experience created by BTS USA to kick off a broader corporate change process at Texas Instruments.

## **The Simulation**

Texas Instruments (TI) co-created with BTS USA a dynamic simulation experience to begin changing an overly product-centric corporate culture. The simulation experience, called "The Customer Loyalty Boot Camp," allows TI managers to "walk a mile in the

customer's shoes." The simulation puts TI managers in charge of running a business profiled to mirror some of their largest customers. Participants manage a digital consumer electronics company whose success is deeply linked to the support from their semiconductor solution providers.

While "walking in the customer's shoes," TI leaders begin their experience committed to purchasing semiconductors from a vaguely familiar sounding chip supplier, "Terrific Instruments." We specifically coached the BTS/"Terrific Instruments" facilitators to operate with many of the same overly product-centric traits of the real TI (late delivery, technical arrogance, execution missteps, lack of responsiveness to customer demands, and more).

The simulation experience is designed to have an emotional/visceral impact. It is also designed to teach what we had identified as four key drivers of customer loyalty:

Execution:	Must keep promises to customers
Knowledge:	Must establish intimate knowledge of the customer's business (system and product specification knowledge are not enough)
Responsiveness:	Must consistently demonstrate responsiveness to customers in order for them to feel valued and respected
Long-term view:	Must demonstrate a long-term view with customers

Further, it reinforced the essential requirement to have the customer's perspective at the core of our decision-making process.

Besides the customized, computer-based business simulation of the customer's business, the experience also includes human simulation (role playing), videotaped customer interviews, mini-case studies that analyze how TI missteps impacted its customers' business in the past, and Q&A/storytelling by senior TI executives.

## Results

The simulation experience was designed to be the first step in our broader change process, which included changing corporate metrics, structurally changing the sales organization, modifying/simplifying our key performance metrics with the sales force, reinitiating a formal customer satisfaction measurement process, and making other essential improvements. But, as in all change efforts, the first step (engaging hearts and minds) is often the most important and the most difficult. This simulation experience was initially delivered to three hundred of the most powerful leaders inside our company. After the first year, it was deployed more widely and has been delivered to over

2,500 TI executives and managers in six countries. It has become clear that this simulation experience has been integral in turning TI from a product-centric to a customer-centric culture and has been a key element in turning around our decreasing market share problem.

## **Why Simulation? (The BTS/Dan Parisi Perspective)**

In a presentation, Michael Schrage, MIT's leading expert on the economics of innovation and author of *Serious Play: How the World's Best Companies Simulate to Innovate*, stated that many corporate executives fall into a common communication trap. Many of them implicitly believe in the following equation:

$$\text{Change in Information} = \text{Change in Behavior}$$

Schrage states that many executives think that a better-formulated strategy presentation or more clearly articulated change initiative can begin to effect change. He says that, regardless of message content, adults are resistant to change unless they have a chance to "persuade themselves." He also says the most effective way to drive behavior change is through experiential learning. Therefore, he modifies the equation:

$$\text{Change in Information} + \text{Simulation} = \text{Change in Behavior}$$

The addition of "simulation" into the equation is critical, as it allows adults to experience key issues, challenges, and scenarios and persuade themselves as to why they should change. Without the self-persuasion element, attempts to change behavior by transferring new information can be empty intellectual exercises.

Senior TI executive Jeff McCreary knew that he would have to do more than just "change information" to drive change at TI. In fact, he noticed that others in TI had attempted to convince TI employees to change by using the following communication vehicles:

- A well-designed PowerPoint slide presentation, which clearly showed the economic impact of TI's lack of customer-centricity. The slides even showed how it would impact share price—and ultimately TI employee wallets.
- Videotaped interviews with TI customers. These videos contained frank messages from TI customers exhorting TI employees to improve execution.

As well designed as these communication tools were, the messages “bounced off” the well-entrenched product-centric culture. People nodded in agreement with the logic of the PowerPoint slides, but the messages did not seem to stick. A few days after the “PowerPoint extravaganza,” people were not behaving differently. In response to seemingly convincing customer videos (who can argue with “the voice of the customer”?), some engineers were overheard saying, “Those customers just don’t understand that we’re on the leading edge of technology. They need our products, and they’ll just have to put up with our problems.”

Clearly, the people designing these change messages were not giving TI employees a chance to “persuade themselves.” Jeff knew TI employees with rigorous scientific backgrounds were inherently skeptical. He knew that he could leverage the impact of his message if he could take advantage of the fact that the TI culture was responsive to learning situations in which they could “tinker” with cause and effect, play out multivariate scenarios, and assess quantitative impacts. He also knew he needed to create a profound learning experience that would break down resistance and get into people’s hearts and minds—an experience that impacted them both intellectually and emotionally. Jeff also knew the participants would respond with serious effort and a real commitment when placed in a competitive team environment. That is why he turned to BTS USA to build a customized simulation experience. The resistant product and engineering managers were now going to have a chance to “persuade themselves” to change overly product-centric behaviors by “walking a mile in the customer’s shoes.”

## The Customer Loyalty Simulation

### Realism, Relevance, and Applicability to the Job

BTS began a three-month-long customization process in which the simulated customer company, called Streavo, and the 2.5-day event would be created. The event itself was called “The Customer Loyalty Boot Camp.” The simulated customer needed to appear realistic enough to engage employees’ imagination, yet simple enough to execute three years of running a simulated company over the 2.5-day training event. By co-designing the simulation closely with TI engineering and marketing managers, the products being simulated paralleled the products of many TI “real-life” customers.

- The simulated products are highly dependent on the “Terrific Instruments” semiconductors inside the product.
- The simulated products are sold into very competitive markets, where time to market, cost, and differentiation are critical.

A case study (pre-work received one week before the event) was created that communicated to the twenty-five TI managers invited to each program what kind of company they would be running during the simulation. They were told that they would be broken into five teams of five managers and that each team would be in competition against the others. They were also told that they would be measured by which team could build the most revenue and profit while running the customer's business over the simulated three years.

Of course, there was a catch. To execute their strategies over the three simulated years, their simulated company (Streavo) would be highly dependent on a sometimes difficult semiconductor supplier named "Terrific Instruments."

## The Visceral Simulation Event

BTS uses a discovery learning process that has been refined over the last two decades. While senior TI executive Jeff McCreary created the customer loyalty framework (execution, knowledge, responsiveness, long-term view), BTS provided the learning process shown in Figure 1 (on page 136).

The following section briefly describes each of the key components of the learning process.

### *The Customized Simulation Experience*

The simulation was designed to create a high-pressure, competitive environment in which teams never seem to have enough time or data. The TI managers are tasked with running their customer's complex product development process, including being responsible for the customer's market launch dates, revenue/profit growth, and employee satisfaction. Once the TI managers were in the simulated "customer cockpit," they needed to select various combinations of semiconductor speed, power, and functionality to drive their handset product. They also had to begin the "design in" process, whereby they begin to allocate resources around embedding the semiconductor into the guts of their wireless handset product. Critical interdependencies were simulated between semiconductor and handset product image quality, feature richness, battery life, and ease of use.

Each simulated year lasts about 3.5 hours. About 2.5 hours into the first simulated year, teams are asked to hit a "supplier commit" button in the simulation. This freezes the contract between the simulated company and its supplier's (Terrific Instruments) chip specs and puts the customer business (Streavo) at the "point of no return." That is, in the last hour of the simulated first year, you are totally dependent on the chip supplier to deliver the cost, performance, and delivery date promised. Once "commit" is pressed, you can only manage the non-product variables of the customer company.

But there is a problem . . . and it begins with the product manager from Terrific Instruments knocking on the first team's breakout room door. The first of six consecutive Terrific Instruments' execution failure messages are delivered. The first one reads:

Dear Streavo Management Team:

Allow me to report on the progress of the handset chip you ordered.

At Terrific Instruments we think we are . . . well . . . Terrific, but sometimes we can also be a little late. The bad news is that the chip will be twenty-one days late. The good news is that you might get it in roughly the quarter you expected it.

We think this is pretty good. It could have been much worse. Count your blessings.

As you know, we work on the bleeding edge of technology and things like this are bound to happen.

Regards,

Dee Lay

Terrific Manager

This seemingly minor delay is then input into the simulated company's product development parameters in real-time. Suddenly, the chip arriving twenty-one days late prevents the managers from launching the product in time for the "back to school" high-demand season. Streavo's revenue forecast has to be adjusted downward. With revenues off by 25 percent, gross margin has dropped to zero.

After the next few messages from Terrific Instruments (impacting promised chip cost, quality, and performance), a perfectly optimized product development process is in tatters. The managers are quickly running out of time to deal with the Terrific messages. The managers running the simulated customer company demand a response from Terrific Instruments. Their business has been materially impacted by Terrific's execution problems. They are going to be competitively disadvantaged in the market. They are upset. They want answers. Message back from Terrific: "Sorry, we are too busy visiting an important customer and can't meet with your company today . . . maybe tomorrow." Yes, there is some hyperbole in the messages and the approach. However, it is so close to what the participants have really seen happen in the past that the impact is enormous. In every simulation we ran, you could find folks expressing the fact that these delays and execution and communication failures were consistent with things TI had done to customers in the past.

I have delivered this simulation over fifty times at TI, and it never fails to have a visceral/emotional impact on the TI managers running the simulated customer business. The fact that Terrific Instruments lacked execution, lacked intimate knowledge

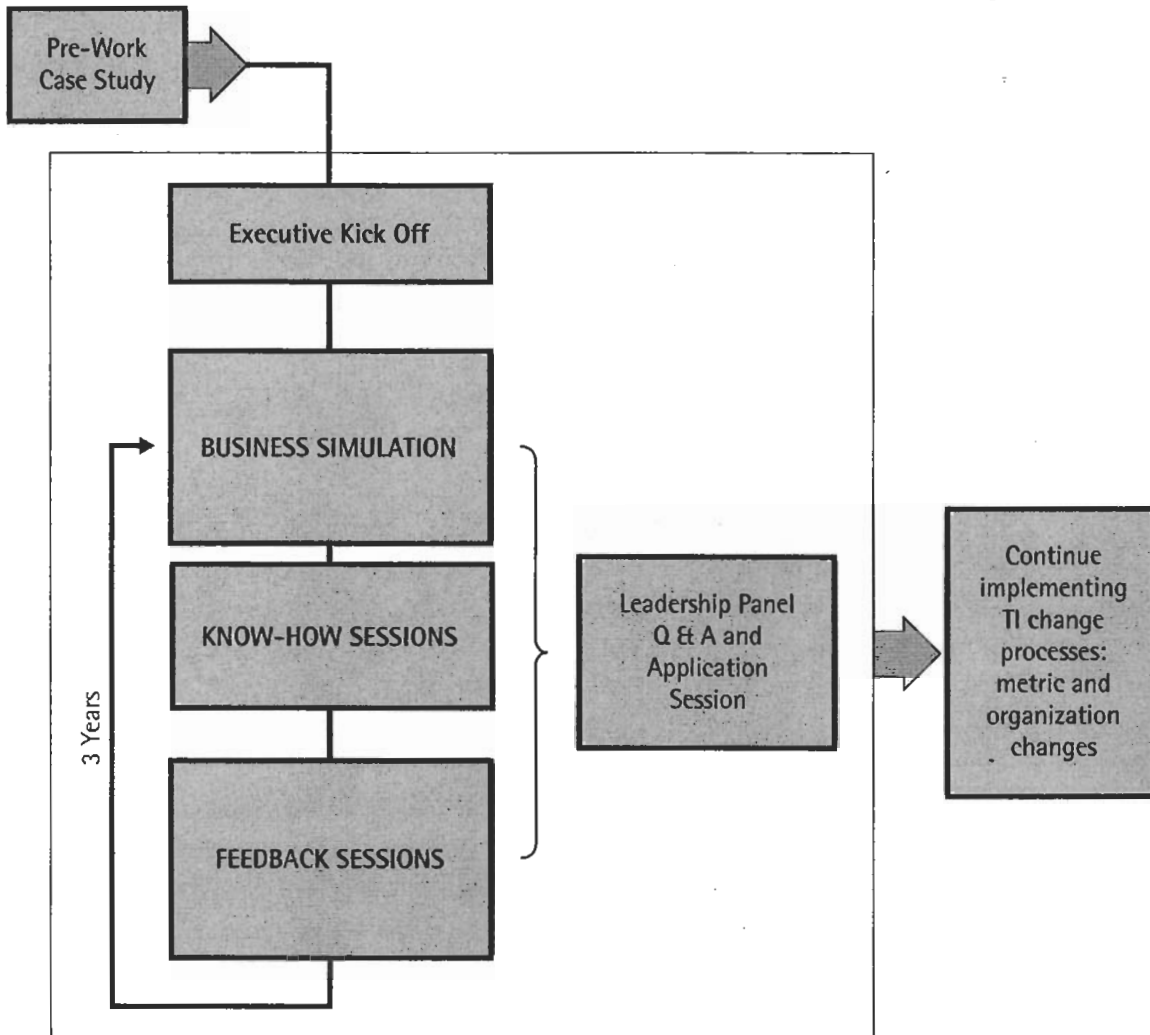


Figure 1. The TI Customer Loyalty Boot Camp

of its customer, was not responsive, and lacked a long-term view of this growing customer's business is an experiential learning "coup" around Jeff's four key customer loyalty learning objectives.

Instead of listening to a PowerPoint presentation on why customers defect, the TI managers are "walking a mile in the customer's shoes," a painful mile they will not soon forget.

In year 2, the TI managers running the Streavo customer business are offered an opportunity to switch away from Terrific Instruments to another supplier. They can switch to Terrific's simulated chip competitors who happen to resemble TI's real-life arch-competition (with names changed to protect the innocent). All teams end up switching to Terrific's competitors. A key learning point: the competitors don't necessarily have superior technology, but they offer a superior customer experience. The

TI managers running Streavo switch because the competitors offer better execution, more intimate knowledge of their business, more responsiveness, and a longer-term view. Besides the high irony of TI managers switching to simulated versions of their own real-life competitors, Jeff's customer loyalty learning objectives are once again driven home.

### *The Know-How Sessions*

As you have read above, it should be clear that the simulation provides a high-impact, experiential, emotional learning experience. We knew we could reinforce the experiential impact on skeptical, analytical TI managers with other methods as well, and know-how sessions were one of those—the goal being that the cumulative effect of several different learning methods would create an irrefutable impetus for change at TI.

The know-how sessions contain mini-case studies from specific TI examples, which "dollarize" the impact of poor execution on TI customers and on TI itself (lost revenue/profit and reputation impact). The know-how sessions also contain videotaped interviews with major customers. Interestingly, these were the same videos we mentioned earlier—the videos that, when presented in isolation, were easy for engineers to rationalize about or ignore.

For the know-how sessions, teams leave their breakout rooms (somewhat shell-shocked from the simulation experience) and gather in a large conference room. The experience is debriefed. They are asked to explain how they feel (feelings are not commonly discussed in a data-driven, engineering culture) about Terrific Instruments. They responded with descriptions like angry, betrayed, and eager to switch suppliers. They described Terrific's arrogance and product centricity and the fact that they lost trust in Terrific as a supplier. They were shocked by Terrific's lack of responsiveness.

Then we played the customer videos. The customers echo many of the same sentiments, only this time they are talking about the real-life Texas Instruments. When the stop button is hit on the video, you could hear a pin drop in the room. One manager described "feeling it in his stomach." Suddenly, the videos that were once ignored are now hitting home emotionally and personally. Why? The answer is simple: prior to the simulation the videos were only "change in information." This time, we expanded the equation to include "change in information + simulation"—we added the experiential element that allowed managers to "persuade themselves."

The final know-how session consists of a leadership panel hosted by three senior TI executives. We knew the subject matter of customer loyalty was equal parts art and science. To discover the "art" of customer loyalty, we knew that executive "storytelling" would be a powerful learning method. The three senior executives answered challenging questions from the audience and also shared their own compelling stories about how they handled difficult customer loyalty tradeoffs over their careers.

### *Feedback Session*

For those managers in the room who love data and evidence, we turned to the highly quantitative feedback sessions, which contain data generated from the annual simulation results. The objective data is overwhelming: a chip company's smallest execution missteps can have enormous "domino effect" impacts on a customer's business. Poor execution by a chip supplier can hobble a large customer and put a small customer out of business. And most importantly, now they know what it *feels* like to run a customer's business that is on the receiving end of this poor execution. The feedback session also updates managers on the simulated competition, thus further engaging them in the simulation process.

### *Application Session*

On the last half-day of the 2.5-day experience, managers spend time dialoguing with key leaders and committing to actions they will implement back on the job. Teams take time to reflect on the learning and prepare presentations to the senior executives. Executives question and clarify commitments during the final presentation. Plans are taken back to the workplace and followed up on with managers in semi-annual review meetings.

## **Lasting Impact**

One of the most important impacts of the customer loyalty simulation experience was that it created a milestone cultural event and a new language for over 2,500 managers at TI.

At the end of the simulation experience, we give out baseball hats with "Terrific Instruments" written across the front. We told TI managers that, if they ever witness other TI employees acting overly product-centric, technically arrogant, or inwardly focused, they should just place the hats on their heads and stand there quietly until others notice. We heard from many managers that this simple action went a long way to getting the message out. When managers who had attended the simulation experience saw another manager place a hat on his head, they immediately "got the joke" and realized they were slipping back into some old, bad habits. One senior executive went as far as giving his most important customer the "Terrific Instruments" baseball hat with the following instruction: "If a TI employee is acting in an overly product-centric manner, please place this hat on your head; the employee will immediately 'get your point' and correct the behavior." The customer has used the hat several times—to great effect.

In the end, the Customer Loyalty Boot Camp was the critical first step in a broad TI change initiative. Jeff McCreary was able to capture the hearts and minds of thousands of executives and managers. Since the Customer Loyalty Boot Camp started rolling out in 2002, TI has seen improvements across the board, from market share to improved execution. Most important, customers notice the difference, and loyalty has increased.

We know that it would be naïve to credit only the Customer Loyalty Boot Camp, but the fact is that, since initiation of this simulation experience, the company has had four years of consecutive market share growth in its three most important and highly targeted markets. Anecdotal evidence, once again collected in the form of videotaped interviews with customers, also supports the perspective that Texas Instruments is making clear and impressive progress in becoming more customer-focused. Combined with the record profitability that TI has been delivering in recent quarters, it all adds up to a vastly improved enterprise.

*Dan Parisi is a BTS USA partner and the general manager of BTS San Francisco. Throughout his ten-year career at BTS, Mr. Parisi has pioneered the application of customized business simulations for leading Fortune 100 clients such as Hewlett Packard, Texas Instruments, Cisco, and others. He is passionate about making business learning "come to life" through simulation and strives to make learning business concepts fun, memorable, strategically relevant, and highly applicable to the job. Besides innovating how companies use business simulations to develop leaders, Mr. Parisi spends much of his time as a senior facilitator. He has led over 7,000 executives and managers through simulation experiences focused on aligning management teams to corporate strategies and initiatives. He received his MBA in finance from New York University.*

*Jeff McCreary recently retired from Texas Instruments as a senior vice president and the worldwide sales and marketing manager. He was responsible for TI sales and account management, field technical support, and channel marketing strategies around the globe. A twenty-three-year Tler, Mr. McCreary was named a vice president in 1995 and a senior vice president in 1998. He led the turnaround of TI's worldwide military semiconductor business in the early 1990s, resulting in record sustained profitability. He also managed TI's highest volume business, Advanced System Logic, and held assignments in product development, sales management, and technical sales. Prior to joining Texas Instruments, Mr. McCreary held engineering and strategic marketing positions within the Bell System. He earned a B.S. in electrical engineering from the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and an honorary doctorate of engineering from the Institute as well. He currently serves on the Rose-Hulman Board of Trustees and the Board of the Global Wireless Engineering Consortium (GWEC).*